Issue 6 | October 2010

InForm

A journal for international foundation programme professionals

Special conference edition

Developing a core module

Helping Foundation Year students

Embedding the use of Blackboard

IFP students diagnosing learning needs

And more ...

InForm Conference 2011

Internationalisation – How far can it go?

We are proud to announce the second *InForm* Conference which will provide a welcome opportunity for interaction and sharing of practice with others from the IFP sector.

The event will take place at the University of Reading and will include seminars and workshops on themes related to international foundation programmes.

Saturday 16 July 2011

Palmer Building, Whiteknights Campus
University of Reading

Conference fee: £55.00

Registration

To register, please complete the enclosed registration form or download a copy from **www.reading.ac.uk/inform**

Registration forms should be received along with the conference fee no later than 31 May 2011.

Speaker proposals

Speaker proposals are invited from professionals involved in the delivery of international foundation and pathway programmes. As usual, the focus should be on issues associated with teaching and learning in this particular sector. Sessions need to appeal to tutors and course managers from across the curriculum.

We are particularly interested in receiving proposals which involve collaboration between tutors across subject areas, as this aligns with the inherent diversity embedded within most international foundation programmes.

In order to submit a proposal, please submit an abstract of no more than 60 words and a presentation outline of no more than 250 words.

A speaker proposal form is enclosed in this edition and available for download from

www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Please email all speaker proposals to **inform@reading.ac.uk** by 30 April 2011.

Inside *InForm* ...

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and Mrs Amanda Fava-Verde

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From the Editorial Board ...

I would like to begin by warmly welcoming InForm's new Editor, Elisabeth Wilding, to the Editorial Board. Elisabeth takes over from Anthony Manning, the original driving force behind InForm. Many of you will have read Elisabeth's prior contributions to InForm, including her article on using web-based technology for international student recruitment in our last issue.

We are very happy to report that the first *InForm* Conference held in July was a resounding success. The positive feedback received from many delegates on its stimulating content and the opportunities it provided for interaction has been instrumental in our decision to hold a second event next summer. We hope the Inform Conference will become an annual event in the IFP community calendar and that next year's conference theme – 'Internationalisation – How far can it go?' will inspire speaker proposals from readers.

Needless to say, the congratulatory comments received reflect the work of our speakers who between them provided an interesting day of thought-provoking talks in two parallel sessions – one focussing specifically on English language teaching and learning issues at foundation level, and the other covering a range of more general IFP themes. For our readers who were unable to attend, this special issue of *InForm* features highlights from the Conference.

Following a brief synopsis of the keynote address given by Rebecca Smith of UK Naric, Duncan Hunter and Karin Whiteside discuss their experiences developing a content-based foundation module focussing on academic literacy; this is followed by Alex Baratta's argument for a discipline-specific approach to teaching writing. Will Hutton presents practical ideas for embedding Blackboard, a Virtual Learning Environment, into an existing IFP course and we finish with Florencia Franceschina's report on a study which examines the value of student self- assessment. Papers submitted by speakers are interspersed with overviews of some of the other presentations

As always, we welcome your contributions for future editions of InForm. If you would like to write an article, a review or a letter commenting on issues raised in the journal, please contact us on: **inform@reading.ac.uk**

Amanda Fava-Verde and Elisabeth Wilding
Joint Chairpersons of the *InForm* Editorial Board

Keynote address by Rebecca Smith

Rebecca Smith of UK NARIC, the National Agency responsible for providing advice and information on international qualifications, opened the conference with a keynote address comparing secondary education systems worldwide and examining examples of school-leaving qualifications, an area of practical interest to anyone recruiting to international foundation programmes.

The complex process leading to official recognition of qualifications from some 180 countries involves a thorough evaluation not only of the qualification itself, but also of the education system which produces it, each qualification clearly reflecting the nature of that education system, which in turn reflects a particular approach to learning.

Most international education systems can be viewed as developing from one of three basic education models, familiar to many of us in practice if not in name – the Anglo Model, the Humboldt model and the Napoleonic model. The three models were presented and illustrated with examples of related secondary education qualifications.

The Anglo-Scottish model has noticeably influenced the development of secondary education qualifications in countries such as India, Australia and Hong Kong. We learned that India's Higher Secondary School Certificate, for example, may be awarded by different examining bodies, as is the case for A or AS levels in the UK, but that some are considered more prestigious than others. An awareness of their differentiating features, such as whether English has been taught as a foreign language or as literature, is important.

The American Model offers a shorter, 12 year school cycle, following which all graduates, regardless of level, are awarded the High School Diploma. Admission to college or university in the USA requires students to undergo a range of standardised tests including SATs I and II, (Scholastic Aptitude Test and Achievement Test), the American College Testing Programme and the more academically demanding Advanced Placement Examinations Programme for higher achieving students.

The Humboldt Model, historically of Prussian origin, is now typified by the German system of 13 year schooling leading to the 'Abitur' examination which qualifies the graduate for university entrance. Students study a large number of both science and arts subjects for the Abitur, but not necessarily in less depth. Finally, the Napoleonic model, followed in Russia and former French colonies, is generally characterized by very centralized control; the Algerian Baccalaureat, for example, is delivered directly by the National Education Ministry.

There followed a discussion of recent developments in Russia and Hong Kong: there have been important changes in Russia to the state approved 'Attestat', the Russian Certificate of Secondary Education which until now was set by local schools. To combat the potential for corruption, the Attestat has now been replaced by the nationwide Unified State Examination (USE) which is compulsory and limited to a one-year validity period for university entrance.

There was a great deal of interest from the audience in NARIC's up-to-the-minute commentary on the new secondary qualifications currently being phased in in Hong Kong to bring it more in line with the Mainland Chinese system. HKCEEs and Hong Kong A Levels are being replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education at the end of a 12-year cycle, as opposed to 13. A NARIC project benchmarking the new Diploma against A levels grades is currently underway.

Developing a core module for a Foundation Programme

About the authors

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In the process of developing a core module for an undergraduate foundation programme, our team sought to arrive at some key principles which would help us to design and implement our syllabus in a consistent and logical manner. Since our goal was to prepare learners for study in a 'real' undergraduate environment, two principles in particular emerged which embodied our aspirations for the module. In this article we look at our efforts to firstly, apply a supported, content-based approach to syllabus design and lesson planning, and secondly to make academic literacy central to the learners' experience of the module.

The module

The module we are designing is the core double unit for an UG Foundation programme, provisionally entitled 'Global Perspectives'. The course has a specific content focus: it aims to equip learners with an understanding of key concepts and approaches surrounding the inter-disciplinary concept of globalisation. The typical teaching week begins with a one-hour lecture, and concludes with a two hour seminar. In addition to these content-focused sessions, three two-hour classes are timetabled to support students in their performance of (largely content-related) language and skills.

Principles for design

At the very beginning of the design process, our team sought to establish some basic principles which we hoped would help us to build a syllabus, and design lessons, which addressed learner needs effectively. Although the process of arriving at our 'key principles' was lengthy and somewhat iterative, two consistent practices emerged which we found particularly helpful:

1. Apply a supported, content-based approach to syllabus design and lesson planning
2. Make academic literacy central to the learners' experience of the module

Each 'principle' will be briefly expounded below.

'… two consistent practices emerged which we found particularly helpful …'

A 'supported' content-based approach

Our first principle was that we should maintain a content focus, whilst still providing learners with effective language and skills support. Many implementations of a content-based approach (e.g. Brinton et al. (1989)) exist, with varying opinions concerning the usefulness of separate language instruction.

We sought to achieve a high degree of integration and balance. Content-focused (lecture and seminar) sessions were developed to be as 'authentic' as possible, focusing on content for its own sake and delivering conceptual information that is rich and directly valuable to learners in terms of their destination course studies. At the same time, language activities were planned which supported students in their performance of content focused tasks, and which used texts (lectures, textbooks, articles, written assessments) as opportunities for meaningful language extension. The principle is illustrated by Figure 1 below, which shows a 'planning grid' considering a week's content and language aims side-by-side. By identifying which texts students needed to read to prepare for lectures, for example, it was possible to design a class that dealt with lexical and structural issues arising from the text, and which gave practice in skills that are necessary for its successful use.

Lecture	Text-based Learning	Speaking/ Listening skills	Seminar
Global History 1: The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution	**Preparatory Reading:** Text pages 559-563 **Skills:** Surveying a text to gain an overall idea of its content **Vocabulary/structure:** Change and transformation/describing trends: e.g. 'towns merged', 'cities grew'+	**Lecture:** Context of history. Focus on slides dealing with key concepts and vocabulary. **Seminar:** Describing visual data.	Interpreting visuals (related to homework text) Mini presentation and jigsaw activity about urbanisation

Figure one: A 'Planning Grid' showing typical linkage between content and language elements of the course.

Making academic literacy central

We also felt strongly that promoting academic literacy should be a key principle in course development. Academic literacy is defined by Leki as 'the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts' (2007, p 3) and Ferenz (2005, pp 339-340) states that it 'encompasses knowledge of the linguistic, textual, social and cultural features of academic written discourse as well as knowledge of English as used by [students']

academic disciplines'. Developing academic literacy goes beyond merely developing students' reading and writing and Academic English skills to developing students' understanding of the wider purposes of academic communication and of their role as participants in the academic community of their particular discipline. The more integrated, 'holistic' nature of such an approach can be argued to better prepare students for their undergraduate life.

For the practical purposes of course development we identified three key, interconnected areas of focus for academic literacy development. The first area was reading-to-write skills: for the most part undergraduate writing is intrinsically related to the reading process. Students' personal opinions drawn from general knowledge and life experience are usually not deemed valid, but rather ideas and opinions expressed in their writing should be informed by authoritative sources and built from reading and evidence (Moore and Morton, 2005). Thus, reading-to-write is not merely mastery of a set of reading and writing sub-skills, but rather involves understanding how to use reading in writing, how to identify the purpose of texts and treat them accordingly, and how to build critical writing on source-use.

'… for the most part undergraduate writing is intrinisically related to the reading process.'

The second area of focus, very much related to reading-to-write, was on understanding the role of sources. Abasi and Graves (2008, p.230) in their study of international students' perception of plagiarism, state that '[I]nstitutional documents [on plagiarism] prompted students to think academic attribution was more about avoiding plagiarism than responding creatively to the ideas of others'. Although their study was of graduate students, we felt that their findings were also relevant for undergraduates and that developing students' ability to deal with sources should go far beyond the negative, plagiarism-obsessed approach that comes to dominate much instruction about academic attribution and referencing.

The third area of focus was that of developing understanding and ability to apply abstract and theoretical ideas. Moore and Morton (2005, p.64) state that in undergraduate writing '[i]deas, theories and laws are as much the focus of writing as situations or actions in the real world'. Coming to grips with theories and being able to relate them to and differentiate them from facts, evidence and real-world contexts becomes central from early on in students' undergraduate studies and very often they find this extremely challenging.

In practice these three areas of focus translate into the following principles for course design:

1 Writing is always a product of reading: From the first lesson onwards writing tasks draw on texts, and examples of writing show the reading-writing link.

2 A positive, 'using sources successfully' approach is taken: Attribution of texts is integrated with reading-to-write tasks and the texts used become more sophisticated, students build and develop their ability to deal appropriately with a variety of sources.

3 Emphasis on theoretical debates and approaches in lectures and seminars: For example, the lecture and seminar programme begins with five 'Context of History' lectures which take students from the Enlightenment through to decolonisation and the end of the cold war, and in subsequent weeks disciplinary theories related to various facets of globalisation are dealt with. Students are able to draw on the historical context to understand and begin to critically evaluate the theory.

Abasi, A.R. & Graves, B., (2008) 'Academic literacy and plagiarism: Conversations with international graduate students and disciplinary professors', *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7, 221–233

Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. B. (1989). *Content-based Second Language Instruction.* New York: Newbury House

Ferenz, O. (2005) 'EFL writers' social networks: Impact on advanced academic literacy development', *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 4, 339–351

Leki, I. (2007) *Undergraduates in a second language: Challenges and complexities of academic literacy development.* New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Moore, T. & Morton, J., (2005), 'Dimensions of difference: a comparison of university writing and IELTS writing', *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 4, 43–66

Teaching Marx to the Marxists by Doug Aiton

In this thought-provoking session, Doug Aiton of Kaplan International College, London talked about the challenges and rewards of teaching Politics to international foundation students.

He believes firmly that content modules taught at foundation level should not just be about the conveying of information, but about developing skills and critical awareness. Doug Aiton refutes the deficit model with regard to international students, contending instead that they are a rich resource of knowledge about their own cultures, languages and histories that needs to be tapped by their foundation-level tutors. In the case of teaching politics, it is about conveying theory but then moving beyond theory to practical applications. Theory should not be abstracted from reality. Foundation level students are very often so anxious to understand the theory being taught that they fail to see how it applies to the situations in their own countries and lives. Hence the title 'Teaching Marx to the Marxists.' Students from communist or post-communist countries, without help from their tutors, may fail to see how this theory of Marxism has been worked out in reality in their own countries. He also gave an example of teaching the concept of federal governments and separation of powers. It was not until he suggested to his Nigerian students that they might have something to contribute to the discussion, given that Nigeria has a federal government, that they began to make a connection between the theory being taught and their real, lived experiences. Such discussions engender deeper learning. All content tutors need to help their students overcome nervousness and to engage in their learning, not only on an abstract level, but experientially too.

Helping foundation year students to understand discipline-specific writing skills

About the author

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This paper argues that preparation for academic writing within English for Academic Studies Foundation Year (FY) courses needs to go beyond the basics and incorporate a discussion of discipline-specific writing conventions. Moreover, when students take FY courses within their actual discipline, lecturers might consider essay analysis as a means to help students understand how the generic aspects of academic writing – such as the need for a coherent structure – coexist among more specific conventions, those which are typical of their discipline, but perhaps not others.

Academic writing in different departments

While Tang and Suganthi (1999, p.S23) point out that 'academic writing has traditionally been thought of as a convention-bound monolithic entity that involves distant, convoluted and impersonal prose', Becker (1998: back cover of Swales' book, *Other Floors, Other Voices)* mentions that 'another culture may be only a trip up or down a flight of stairs'. This has implications for academic writing, which may indeed exhibit differences from one discipline to another. Though the literature recognises the importance of discipline-specific writing conventions (Biber, 1988; MacDonald, 1994; Gimenez, 2008), this focus has arguably not made its way, on any appreciable level, to the actual writing classroom.

Gimenez (2008, p.152) argues that 'writing lecturers appear to focus on the basic principles of writing', such as structuring and referencing, thus ignoring features of writing which are specific to individual disciplines. Woodward-Kron (2004, p.140) offers an implication for this generic approach, stating that it could lead to 'making connections and generalizations about student writing that may be inaccurate and misleading for specific disciplinary contexts'.

Rhetorical conventions of writing in different departments

In terms of the writing conventions of different disciplines, the research of Hyland (2000) reveals that disciplines in the Social Sciences tend to hedge more than disciplines in the

hard sciences, perhaps in large part due to the more interpretative nature of the Social Sciences (and Humanities). Likewise, this (personal) interpretive nature can also help to explain why, according to the research of MacDonald (1994), the Social Sciences also rely less on nominalizations, in favour of a more personal tone (e.g. assisted by use of first person pronouns within active structures). On the other hand, Biber (1988) and MacDonald (1994) regard the hard sciences as being noted for a prominent nominalization and passive use, as these combined linguistic features can assist in the removal of a human agent from the sentence, thus leading to more impersonal prose for which the sciences are well known. In addition, composition textbooks often encourage students to write with a catchy turn of phrase and rely on figures of speech: 'do make your word choices as fresh and original as possible'; 'enliven your writing with figurative language' (Wyrick, 2002, p.159,167). While figures of speech are well suited to academic writing in the literature department, they might be seen as inappropriate for the sciences, however, given the need for science students to write in a more concrete manner.

'Clearly, the approach taken within US writing classes is something which FY writing classes can improve upon …'

Therefore, Hoadley-Maidment (1997, p.57) rightly states that learning the rules of one's department – to include how to write academic essays – 'is an essential task for students as they are acculturated into the academic community'.

Implications of the US approach to academic writing

While the USA has recognised the importance of academic writing within its *Freshman Composition* class, the approach taken toward academic writing tends to be 'one size fits all', despite the fact the class may include several different 'majors'. The comment above regarding the importance given to figures of speech in writing classes, for example, illustrates this issue. However, the style in which students are instructed to write their thesis statements (or 'argument' in UK terms) is an area more in need of consideration.

The thesis statement

According to Wyrick (2002, p.33) 'a good thesis states the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject. You must tell your reader what you think. Don't dodge the issue; present your opinion specifically and precisely'. Oshima and Hogue (2006, p.67) state that a thesis should not be 'a simple announcement'. Wyrick concurs, saying that a thesis should not be 'merely an announcement of your subject matter or a description of your intentions. State an attitude toward the subject' (p. 237), further declaring that 'the single most serious error is the "so-what" thesis' (p. 229). Neman (1995, p.44) states that 'the obviously persuasive paper is just a more blatant example of what all good expository writing actually is' (original emphasis); this is the crux of the thesis in the US writing class: to give your opinion on the subject.

However, within subjects devoted to exploratory research, the thesis statement is quite different: a statement of purpose + research question(s):

> *The aim of this piece of work is to compile a case study on a child between the ages of three and eight years old, centring on their use and acquisition of literacy both in the home and at school.* This case study will include observations, recordings, comments from the parent and child, examples of the child's work and also a reflective diary. This information shall be accompanied by a full analysis of the most interesting and relevant discoveries.

The italicised sentence in the sample above is a statement of the essay's intentions, thereby going against the advice for what a good thesis statement should be. But in the context of exploratory research (e.g. case studies), it is entirely appropriate. Clearly, the approach taken within US writing classes is something which FY writing classes can improve upon and essay analysis is a way in which to achieve this goal. Through essay analysis, FY students can see both the generic aspects of good academic writing (e.g. a unified focus) as well as those which are discipline-specific.

Academic writing samples from two disciplines

Literature

Goethe in Faust and Shelley in Frankenstein, wrap their stories around two men whose mental and physical actions parallel one another. Both stories deal with characters, who strive to be the *übermensch* in their world. In Faust, the striving fellow, Faust, seeks physical and mental wholeness in knowledge and disaster in lust. In Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein struggles for control.

Science

The lactate threshold refers to a physiological barrier the human body encounters during exercise. During exercise the body uses oxygen as energy to power the muscles. The body uses three energy systems which provide energy for exercise, two of which are anaerobic (without oxygen) and one is aerobic (with oxygen). These anaerobic energy systems produce energy without the use of oxygen. As this is done the production of lactic acid occurs.

Through analysis of the two introduction samples, students can see how both use background information as a means to lead into their essay's focus, but also how the use of language differs. For example, the metaphor of 'wrap their stories around' is highly fitting for *literature* academic writing, but simply lacks the precision needed for scientific academic writing.

Likewise, the use of present tense in both writing samples is revealing. Literature writing uses present tense as a rhetorical means to symbolise that the literature has an ongoing, continuous presence as each book or poem is read; in the sciences, however, present tense is used to record facts.

Conclusion

The teaching of basic academic writing skills is necessary for all students, yet writing provision within Foundation Year programmes has a chance to improve upon the US model by providing not just basic information, but also that which is specific to the student's discipline. As FY programmes are designed to prepare students for the future demands of their individual courses, this is a wise choice. Also, as FY students study academic writing prior to beginning the first year of their degree, they are better positioned for their future writing assignments

Becker, A.L. (1998). Professor Emeritus of Linguistics. The University of Michigan.

Biber, D. (1988). *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gimenez, J. (2008). Beyond the Academic Essay: Discipline-Specific Writing in Nursing and Midwifery. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 7(3),* 151–164.

Hoadley-Maidment, E. (1997). From 'Story' to Argument: the Acquisition of Academic Writing in an Open-Learning Context. *Language and Education 11*(1), 55–68.

Hyland, K. (2000). Disciplinary Discourses – Social Interactions in Academic Writing. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

MacDonald, S. (1994). *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Neman, B. (1995). *Teaching Students to Write*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Oshima, A. and Hogue, A. (2006). *Writing Academic English*. White Plains, NY : Pearson Education.

Tang, R. and Suganthi, J. (1999). The 'I' in Identity: Exploring Writer Identity in Student Academic Writing through the First Person Pronoun. *English for Specific Purposes 18*, S23–S39.

Woodward-Kron, R. (2004). 'Discourse Communities' and 'Writing Apprenticeship': An Investigation of these Concepts in Undergraduate Education Students' Writing." *Journal of English for Academic Purposes 3*(2), 139–161.

Wyrick, J. (2002). *Steps to Writing Well*. Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers

Did Smith state, mention or claim? Students struggle with verbs of citation by Kathryn Brennan

In this English language session, Kathryn Brennan of Kaplan International College, London referred to research that she and Esme Duncan have undertaken, analysing the usage of verbs of citation in foundation-level student writing.

She pointed out that verbs of citation are frequently taught in IFP English classes, and suggested that there are some central questions we should ask about this subject: Why teach these verbs? How are they currently being taught? How do foundation students use them in their essays? how are they actually used in professional academic texts? The initial results from their research have suggested some interesting answers to the last two questions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, higher-level students used far more and a greater variety of reporting verbs in their essays than those at lower levels. However, an analysis of the use of integral and non-integral citations considered separately revealed the relatively frequent use of the latter at all levels. Does this matter? Should teachers encourage the use of integral citations in order to demonstrate critical thinking and build a more critical argument? Perhaps there is no simple answer to this question. The analysis of academic articles in a variety of disciplines provided some particularly relevant results, as they demonstrated that patterns of citation vary greatly across disciplines. The examples provided indicated that science writing seems to have far more citations (although mostly non-integral) than subjects such as business or politics. This may serve as a useful reminder of how discipline-specific some writing guidelines need to be. The presentation was based on preliminary findings so it will be very interesting to see what the final study reveals and what it might suggest for our own teaching

The challenges and opportunities of embedding the use of Blackboard on an International Foundation Programme

About the author

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Blackboard is a Virtual Learning platform and has been used in a limited manner on the International Foundation Programme at Queen Mary, University of London for several years. This paper discusses how the use of this powerful technology can be expanded and deepened to address some of the existing and future challenges faced in delivering the English Language and Study Skills module of the International Foundation Programme at Queen Mary in order both to improve student attainment and enrich the student experience

Introduction

Queen Mary's International Foundation Programme (IFP), which was established in 1990, has seen a marked increase in student numbers and a diversification of the cohort in recent years, with an increased proportion of students joining the programme after having received an English-medium secondary school education. All students take a compulsory module in English Language and Study Skills (ELSS) for twenty-five per cent of available credit in addition to three optional academic modules. Hitherto, Blackboard has been used in a limited way as a depository for programme documentation and self-study material. It has also been used more extensively to guide students through the UCAS application process. The intention of this paper is to consider how Blackboard can be used in a more integrated manner on the IFP in order to improve student engagement with ELSS Writing Tests.

'… how Blackboard can be used in a more integrated manner on the IFP …'

The challenges ahead

The desire to explore ways of embedding the use of Blackboard for ELSS on Queen Mary's IFP is prompted by a number of challenges currently being faced on the IFP. These relate both to the specifics of the student experience of the ELSS Writing Tests and more general trends on the IFP as whole. Taking the second point first, it is clear that increased student numbers, including a greater proportion of students with English as an L1, is challenging. Increasingly, ELSS tutors are juggling the demands of developing higher order analytical skills for students with a good command of English with the need to address remedial language needs. This occurs within a foundation programme context of limited class time for ELSS as students fulfil their commitments to their optional modules for the bulk of available credit. Furthermore, greater student numbers mean there is an increased need to communicate with students on the programme as a whole using a variety of technologies. E-learning as an integral component of pedagogic provision is increasingly expected and the possibilities are enormous (Bonk, 2009). Turning to the first challenge, success on the ELSS Writing Tests involves students actively reading a series of dense academic texts in advance of test day and, crucially, engaging with the issues discussed so as to produce a coherent response under test conditions. Many Queen Mary IFP students struggle with the language and the concepts in the set texts and, while some class time is spent on tackling this, feedback from staff and students highlights the need for additional support in preparing for these tests.

Why make use of Blackboard

There are a number of reasons why more extensive use of a VLE such as Blackboard can be beneficial to IFP students. First, it can extend and enhance classroom practice by developing support for students beyond the classroom, which is particularly important when a crowded curriculum limits the amount of class time available. Further, it

'... The involvement of tutors in this way serves to demonstrate to students that the online discussions are an integral part of the module ...'

creates a space where students can both get to know each other and work together academically across tutor groups outside class, in this way fostering a sense of an academic community that encompasses the whole programme. It also allows academic managers and tutors to develop support for students beyond the classroom: vital on programmes such as Queen Mary's IFP where there is a clear need to differentiate teaching and learning strategies in order to address a diverse cohort.

Learning modules on Blackboard

What is proposed is that the Learning Module function on Blackboard be used as a first step towards the embedding of the use of Blackboard on the IFP. Learning Modules on Blackboard essentially allow course content, which can take the form of web links, downloadable content in various media, synchronous and asynchronous discussions, and quizzes and tests, to be organised in a set format so that students work through material in a systematic manner. The staged functionality of the Learning Modules on Blackboard allows for the application of the Five Stage Model of E-learning as developed by Gilly Salmon (Salmon, 2000). IFP students have three practice Reading and Writing tests and three Reading and Writing tests for credit on their ELSS module; therefore, the intention is to create Learning Modules which provide support for each of these. Carefully chosen web links will help to contextualize the topics, which can often be very unfamiliar, thereby enabling students to deepen their schematic understanding, while language-based activities help linguistically weaker students assimilate key lexical terms. Discussion boards provide a forum for students to develop their own interpretations of the material presented in the set texts.

Practicalities

There are a number of considerations in realising this in practice. In particular, the challenge is to embed the use of Blackboard as an integral part of the ELSS module on the IFP so that students will make use of the resources available as a matter of course. To a large extent, this is a question of habit formation. When the use of Blackboard is in order to prepare for credit-bearing assessment on a large programme such as Queen Mary's International Foundation Programme, the support of academic managers is also key to success. Appropriate induction at the beginning of the course with refresher sessions throughout the programme demonstrate what is available and how it can be used. At Queen Mary the very positive contribution from the E-learning Unit with Education and Staff Development (ESD) is helpful in this regard. Induction can be supported by study guides that students can refer to as necessary. Clear alignment of module objectives with activities within the Learning Modules on Blackboard also helps channel students to study appropriately. Above all, the involvement of tutors in moderating both synchronous and asynchronous online discussions is crucial. In their moderating, tutors are applying a range of skills, including contextualising, summarising, drawing links and managing interactions, all commonly used in the classroom, in a new context. The involvement of tutors in this way serves to demonstrate to students that the online discussions are an integral part of the module: "if conferencing is perceived as the norm, they [students] are more likely to accept it" (Macdonald 2006, p.75).

Conclusion

In summary, this presentation at *Inform's* 2010 Conference looked at how Queen Mary, University of London's International Foundation Programme can move forward in its use of Blackboard in order to enhance attainment and the student experience: the challenge of how to harness the potential of this powerful technology appropriately remains ongoing. There was a very useful discussion following this exploratory presentation which underscored the point that successfully implementing embedded learning is far from straightforward and requires careful pedagogical and practical planning.

Bonk, C. (2009). *The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Macdonald, J. (2006). *Blended Learning and Online Tutoring: A Good Practice Guide*. Aldershot: Gower.

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online (Open and Distance Learning Series)*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

How good are IFP students at diagnosing their own learning needs?

About the author

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Manchester Metropolitan University

This paper discusses the value and limitations of IFP students' learning needs self-assessment. It reports on the results of a small-scale longitudinal study that examines the link between students' reported needs and a range of academic performance indicators.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is IFP student diagnostic self-assessment. Put simply, the question that drove the empirical investigation described below was: 'How good are IFP students at diagnosing their own learning needs?' There is an extensive body of literature on different psychometric and pedagogic aspects of self-assessment in Higher Education (e.g., see overviews by Falchikov and Boud, 1989, and Ross, 2006). This paper provides a novel contribution in that IFP students have not previously been the focus of such studies, and neither has diagnostic self-assessment.

A brief review of the literature

Student self-assessment has been argued to have many benefits for a range of stakeholders, including the learners themselves as well as teachers, curriculum developers and policy makers. For example, it has been suggested that self-assessment can increase student engagement, provide opportunities for feedback and revision and encourage independent high-level thinking. Accurate self-assessment can help students to manage their learning well, and it can be very valuable to teachers too, as some information may be difficult to obtain through other methods. Self-assessment can help to make assessment processes and standards transparent to the learner, and it can also be a cost-effective assessment strategy.

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On the other hand, self-assessing is difficult. Hansford and Hattie's (1982) meta-study reports an average correlation of .21 between students' self-assessment and their actual performance, and the correlations between students' self-assessment and their teachers' assessments reported in other studies also tend to be low to moderate (Falchikov and Boud, 1989). However it would be wrong to conclude that students are poor judges of their own abilities across the board, as a number of variables have been identified as affecting the reliability of students' judgements.

For example, self-regulation, which depends on self-assessment skills, is known to be subject to the influence of educational/cultural background (e.g., Purdie and Hattie, 1996). Science students are more accurate self-assessors than students in other subjects (Falchikov and Boud, 1989). Students in advanced courses tend to be more accurate than students in introductory courses, and more academically able students are also more accurate self-assessors than their less academically able counterparts (e.g., Lew et al., 2010). Inaccurate students have been found both to over- and underestimate their abilities and needs. Finally, some studies have shown experience and training to improve students' ability to self-assess (e.g., McDonald, 2010) but many others failed to replicate this type of effect.

These factors are likely to undermine the reliability and validity of IFP student self-assessment, particularly the self-assessment of learning needs, as this is typically done as a low stakes formative exercise and students may therefore not take it as seriously as, for example, summative assessment tasks.

Methodology

Data from a group of 51 IFP students from 16 different nationalities was analysed to investigate the following question: 'How good are IFP students at diagnosing their own learning needs?'

The students were followed for the duration of the 2009-2010 academic year. They were studying on IFPs linked to a range of UG degrees in science, business and humanities at Manchester Metropolitan University. Each student completed a 120-credit IFP comprising a 40-credit EAP module and four other 20-credit modules in study skills and degree-related subjects. They had a minimum English language level of IELTS 5.5 or equivalent at entry.

The analysis focused on the fit between these students' perceived learning needs as report-

ed in questionnaires completed at the beginning and at the end of the academic cycle and a range of performance indicators, including diagnostic test results, attendance records, coursework and exam results. Data from a parallel investigation of staff perceptions of these students' needs gathered through questionnaires and interviews at the beginning of the academic year were also consulted.

Findings

The students' perceived learning needs at the start the IFP were surveyed using individual questionnaires. Their answers were compared to their own performance in all IFP modules and they were found to be accurate about 50% of the time on average. The students' answers to the same learning needs questionnaire and to a programme feedback questionnaire at the end of the academic cycle were also analysed, but the students' predictions were as disparate from their IFP performance then as at entry.

'… but the students' predictions were as disparate from their IFP performance then as at entry.'

The teaching and support staff perception of these students' learning needs was that they had weaknesses in EAP but not in degree-specific knowledge. This was supported by the students' general IFP results: they performed best in numeracy-intensive modules (e.g., Mathematics) and worst in language-intensive modules (e.g., Politics).

An objective-item English language test was administered during the first week of teaching. There was a low correlation of .36 between the students' scores on this test and their final IFP marks. By contrast, there was a high and significant correlation of .81 between the EAP module marks and the overall IFP marks.

After the EAP module marks, IFP attendance was found to be the second best predictor of IFP performance, with a correlation of .65. This is in line with previous research (e.g., Hughes, 2009).

Conclusions

These IFP students' learning needs self-assessment was often inaccurate, but so was the objective language test administered at entry. By contrast, the staff global diagnosis of this cohort's learning needs was accurate. The EAP module marks and attendance records would have allowed us to predict which students were going to underperform or do well across IFP modules.

Understanding both the value and limitations of student learning needs self-assessment is important for pedagogic and other reasons. The weight of the student voice is likely to gain increasing prominence in HE and students' opinions about how well universities address their needs (e.g., through the NSS) may drive policy (e.g., funding allocation) in future.

Some practical suggestions

- Self-assessment is a difficult task so treat self-assessment data with caution.
- A wide range of data collection methods is available to teachers and researchers working in this area. Careful planning of the type and format of student judgement data to be collected will facilitate the interpretation of results.
- Be mindful of factors known to affect self-assessment (see section 2).
- Remember that student self-assessment can remain inaccurate even after training. However, given the range of potential benefits of being able to make accurate judgements about their own skills and learning needs, it is worth the effort to involve students in self-assessment on a regular basis.

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Academic (Mis?)conduct – practices of international students and strategies for addressing them by Mark Fallon

Drawing on his experiences with a pre-masters programme in the UK, Mark Fallon of Liverpool International College considered the issue of academic misconduct from both the international student and the institutional perspective.

He first outlined the challenges facing these students, such as dealing with language difficulties, new cultural norms, and UK pedagogical perspectives, and then highlighted some common student practices (familiar to many) in response to these challenges. In the following discussion delegates were asked to consider specific examples, including the use of translation software, direct copying from an internet source, or the use of essay banks, in order to reach a consensus on what was and was not acceptable by the standards of UK Higher Education. It was relatively easy to agree on what constituted misconduct, but the harder issue is what can be done about it. Taking the view that international students need help to adapt to the expectations of Higher Education, the session then focused on strategies available to institutions to deal with or prevent such unacceptable practices. Could the definition of academic misconduct be re-written? How could questions be made more context dependent and the marking criteria adapted? How could tools such as Turnitin be incorporated into the essay-writing process? Could vivas be a valuable addition to the assessment of an essay? What different forms of writing, beyond the traditional essay, could be used for assessment purposes? The discussion of these questions made this an interesting session reminding us as IFP practitioners of the importance of reviewing our assessment design, policies and procedures.

What challenges lie ahead?

The *InForm* Conference ended with an animated forum bringing all attendees together to discuss the main themes that had emerged from the day's talks.

The *InForm* editorial team now invites articles from our readers on these, the most pressing issues challenging IFP professionals today:

- Engaging students
- Meeting higher student expectations (student as customer)
- Getting students to think critically and to abstract theory to practice.
- Academic misconduct
- Student perceptions of knowledge vs. skills.

Foundation Year Network

The Foundation Year Network is a special interest group for all staff involved in the delivery of foundation year provision within UK HE or FE institutions.

Foundation years frequently cater for cohorts of students with very diverse academic backgrounds including international students from a range of different countries.

The Foundation Year Network exists to encourage the sharing of good practice and data between institutions and practitioners to enhance the delivery of these programmes.

The Foundation Year Network holds an annual meeting for members, the next meeting will be at the University of Sheffield in July 2011 and hosts a wiki at:

http://fynetwork.pbworks.com/

Call for papers

InForm is a journal of teaching and learning-related issues for members of the academic community associated with international foundation programmes.

The submission of papers is now invited for the seventh edition of *InForm*, from tutors who represent a variety of academic disciplines commonly found within international foundation programmes. The seventh edition will be published in April 2011.

Full instructions for writers can be downloaded from the *InForm* website at the following address: **www.reading.ac.uk/inform**

Writers are reminded that *InForm* is not predominantly an English language teaching journal.

Articles and letters should be sent by email to **inform@reading.ac.uk** by 12 pm on 31 January 2011.

Writers whose articles are published in *InForm* will receive a fee of £100. £50 will be paid for any letter which is published.

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